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ABSTRACT

The commonly-occurring mismatch between second language student and course level, resulting in student boredom or intimidation, is due to overreliance on standardized language tests. These tests emphasize passive skills, such as recognition of grammatical structures and translation, and they ignore the element of communicative competence. As a result of a technical mishap, one teacher undertook impromptu individual student interviews consisting of five questions designed to elicit oral responses and five questions to elicit more expansive narratives, which included a past tense and a conjunction. The interview setting was informal and relaxed, and errors were not corrected. In addition to the interview, students were asked to read a portion of a test booklet for pronunciation and to describe pictures. The overall results confirmed a suspicion that the usual recorded speaking portion of the test did not measure student skills adequately and that it would have resulted in incorrect placement of a number of students. Common problems in the test administration setting, such as time pressure, testing after several months away from language instruction, equipment malfunction or inadequacy, and lack of knowledgeable monitors, are suspected of contributing to the student placement problem. Whenever possible, the standardized placement exam should be augmented with a five- or ten-minute interview segment to test communicative abilities. (MSE)

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Toward a more personalized Foreign Language Placement Exam

by Ursula E. Beitter

The scenario I am about to describe is familiar to all who teach first and second year German - or another foreign language: we start to teach German for Beginners, only to find out that five of the 25 students already have had two or more years of German in High School. The same applies to our third semester classes - in a class of 18 there are at least three students who should be in a more advanced class, either in a literature course or in a course on Conversation/Composition. If those "misplaced" students turned out to be good students the suggestions I am about to make would have less urgency. But it has been my experience that those students rarely make good students; they do not enhance the class. This is especially true of those students whose background is German and who have deliberately underperformed (as sometimes happens) to place in a lower level for an "easy" A. Be that as it may, I shall suggest that the students who are misplaced are lost to us and that they need not be. Advanced students in elementary classes constitute a special problem: they are usually resentful, withdrawn and sullen. They are not challenged or motivated because they are repeating work they have already done in High School. In general their work shows all the symptoms of unmotivation and boredom: poor homework record, spotty class attendance. They rely on what they have acquired in High School to "get through" the College course and when they do show up in class they intimidate the true beginners with their supposedly "advanced" knowledge of pronounciation and grammar. To a different degree the same applies to those advanced students who placed in a third semester Reading/Review course: they either keep a low

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profile to keep us in the dark as to how much German they really know or sometimes, if they are genuinely misplaced, they make every effort to show what they know and tend to dominate and monopolize the class, if permitted. Frequently, however, those who are in the wrong level feel underutilized and have a poor work record. Those with two years or more of High School German stay in class a few weeks and then, overcome by the boredom of repetition, drop out to try another language.

The phenomena of misplaced students is a result of our heavy reliance on standardized FL Placement Tests. A study done by Aleamoni and Spencer at the University of Illinois, as far back as 1967, established conclusively that the majority of students taking the placement exam placed under the existing scheme, that is, they were back placed and therefore penalized for their high-school work.[1] There is no question that the punishment aspect of having been placed in a lower class is a major contributing factor to the students' non-performance.

Given the need for motivating students to study a Foreign Language I would like to describe a method of "catching" these students and placing them into levels in which they truly belong. But before embarking on this, I would briefly like to describe the test which contributes to our dilemma and to the students' poor performance. The manner in which the test is administered is also a factor in performance

and will be discussed at a later point. The questions of whose cultural and intellectual values dominate the exam is a topic of discussion amongs psychologists and educators and, though fascinating, it constitutes another aspect of the FL Placement exam question and can not be discussed at the present time. I shall concentrate on examining the over-all composition of the exam and the way it is administered as a factor contributing to poor grades.

It is not my intention to recommend that professors and teachers everywhere test students in the manner I shall outline. Rather, I want to point out that there are serious drawbacks to the exclusive use of the present FL Placement test and that it should be augmented with an oral interview to counteract the deficiencies inherent in a standardized Placement Exam.[2] (My finding are based on the MLA Cooperative FL Placement Exam which is widely used. I have not made a comparative study of the other exams that can be used to place students, but I would speculate that the MAPS and CLEP exams suffer from similar drawbacks.

With the massive influx of students into Colleges in the sixties is became necessary to test and grade in a fashion that would accommodate the large number of students efficiently. However, masses of anything, especially in the field of education always elicits an immediate cry for quality control and standards, and the response in the Foreign Language Departments was to institute the MLA Standardized Test for placing students. Consisting of four parts: reading, listening, speaking and writing it satisfied our need for efficiently testing masses of students, it laid claim to conforming to measurable standards and, above all, it seemed an improvement over older tests which concentrated

only on reading and writing, as observed by Eaton in her article "Evaluation and Testing in Teaching Modern Foreign Languages."[3] In the 25 years that have passed since the exam was compiled (times?), teaching methods as well as students have changed and we should no longer resort to using an exam that was conceived two and one half decades ago, for two reasons: first, it emphasizes passive skills and second, it lacks sections on communicative competence which indicates that the exam is out of step with advances in modern FL pedagogy.[4] Furthermore, if we reflect a moment we should suspect that a person who has studied two to four years of German in High School, has received passing grades and has - in the case of NY State - also passed the Regents exam, should have acquired enough of the language to be spared the embarrassment of being placed in a Beginning German course. Given this fundamental assumption we should suspect that the placement exam used at the present time does not adequately tap the students' FL reservoir. It is certain that the exam does not test what the students know and what they can do with the language - it is almost as if the exam tried to test what the students do not know. I concur with Pimsleur that we need a testing program that shows how much students have learned, not how much they have failed to learn.[5]

Even a cursory glance at the exam tells us much about the nature of its emphasis. The MLA Cooperative FL Test used for placement consists of four parts. The Listening Comprehension part is 25 minutes long,

the Speaking part, in which the students have to record a description of pictures or answers to questions on tape is ten minutes long, the Reading Comprehension part is 35 minutes long and the Writing part takes up 35 minutes. Clearly, this is an exam that stresses passive skills. Out of the thirty students that were involved in this test ten would have been misplaced - six into beginning German and 4 into third semester, where they did not belong. Upon examing the performance on the various sections the following general observations were made: all students - even the ones with a solid German background - performed poorly on the Listening Comprehension part. In the Speaking part during which students have to record their description of pictures even those students who failed other sections of the exam did passable work. The performance on the Reading Comprehension was not stellar though acceptable and the Writing part, which is a grammar part in disguise, was difficult, particularly for those students who did not have a German background or only had two years of High School German.[6] The fact that most students did better on the Speaking part indicates that we are using placement tests that ignore that the emphasis in language acquisition skills has progressed from the passive to the active-communicative approach. This shift in FL methodology ought also be reflected in our placement exams. It is common knowledge that

the modern FL classroom is no longer geared to passive recognition of grammatical structure nor to translation exercises but revolves around a skillful blend of question and answer sessions, conversations based on the personal experiences of the students, skits, sensitivity sessions and a variety of teaching games.[7] Unfamiliarity with the approach of the Placement exam contributes heavily to the students' poor performance and I shall suggest that we compensate for this by including in the placement procedure a test that will also give the students an opportunity to show their communicative abilities.

My suspicion that students knew more than we tested was confirmed two semester ago. While administering the exam to thirty students the tape was destroyed by the sophisticated console that was supposed to run the exam and we had a choice of placing the students on what we had so far (the Listening Comprehension and the Reading Comprehension as well as part of the Speaking part), of canceling the exam and rescheduling it for a later date. Instead it was decided to continue the exam on a one-to one basis. I am fully aware that the continuation of the exam on a one to one, student/teacher basis is a radical deviation from the way the exam is usually administered. But as there are several benefits to the students and the department I believe that this method has merit. What I am about to describe is the impromptu setting in which the exam took place;

To have easier access to the students, to provide privacy and to maximize time, I requested that the students take their exam booklets and assemble in front of my office. There they sprawled out on either side of the corridor and finished the writing part of the exam. As the student finished he/she came into the office for the rest of the exam. It should be added that they knew that the exam was to be finished some way, but no one knew it was to be an "interview-type" setting. (A department in charge of its testing procedures and aware that they can be modified to include modern teaching methods can plan ahead and probably improve on the experience I presently describe.)

In the meantime I had composed ten questions, five of which were responsive in nature, the rest were aimed at eliciting a descriptive answer which ought to have contained a past tense and a conjunction. The first five questions were also calculated to put the students at ease and were of the following nature: 1) How are you now? 2)Do you think you got a good grade on this exam? 3) How long have you studied German? 4) Have you any brothers/sisters? 5) Would you like to travel to Germany? The next set of questions forced the students to be more expansive. They were asked to give reasonable and satisfactory answers to the following situations: 1) You are in a restaurant in Germany. The meal you ordered is no longer warm and you want something else. What do you do and say? 2) Yesterday you witnessed a car accident. Describe to a friend how it happened. 3) What would you do if you were ill with the flu and had to describe your symptoms to a German physician. 4) You are in Germany and need change to make a phone call. What do you do? 5) What German Literature did you read

in High School? A reasonable and satisfactory answer had to be logically correct and would have to make sense to and be understood by a native speaker, such as myself. I allowed a fifteen second response time and if the student wanted to have the questions repeated in that time I would oblige. In addition to repeating the question, which is something likely to occur in a natural-style interchange between two or more people, I also used some body language, taking care not to let the question degenerate into a pantomime. Also, care was taken not to interrupt the students. Errors in grammar and pronounciation were not corrected. If the answer was understandable it was accepted if it was not understandable, it was judged unacceptable. Grades were assigned in the following categories: excellent, good, fair, acceptable and unacceptable. Six unacceptable answers would have indicated that the student would have failed that portion of the oral test. The next portion of the test consisted of a reading to test for pronounciation. For this part I simply used the material from the Speaking part of the test booklet. In the next section I used the pictures of the Speaking part and had the students simply describe what they perceived as taking place on that picture.

When all the results were compared later it became evident that there was a disturbing divergence between the work done in the laboratory and the work done in the office on a one-to-one basis with the format just described. Ten students would have been misplaced had we gone with the results from the language laboratory portion of the exam: Six students into first year, four into third semester when they actually belonged in third year courses. Not all students did poorly as is indicated by the fact that 20 students placed in third semester. Those who did well on all levels were students who had a German family background, who had gone to German school

for a number of years and also those students who had spent time in a German-speaking country.

The grades received on the Standardized Test were much lower than the grades received on the verbal competence section, but after taking into consideration that the students could talk and communicate and would be able to fend for themselves in a German-speaking country I found no justification for placing the marginal students in a first-semester class. Thus, the personalized section of the exam rescued a number of students from being misplaced, a situation which exists not only on the College level but, as Pimsleur has shown, also on the Junior High School level.[10] What these students needed was not to start over again with the same language, but a solid grammar review with ample opportunity for practicing and reading. As third semester College courses are designed for just that purpose those "marginal" students were placed in the third semester. The first three weeks proved to be difficult ones but then they began to work at the level of the class. Not one of the six placed in the above described fashion dropped out or proved to be a disappointing student.

Research into secondary material related to FL methodology and testing revealed that there is considerable concern over testing procedures, as well as test content. The consensus is that standardized testing in the Foreign Languages stresses passive skills and, as suggested, this is out of touch with present FL methodology. While it is still premature to come to a conclusive judgment about the relationship between the content/emphasis of the Placement exam and the students'

performance it is not too early to point out some of the other factors that contribute to the students' generally poor performance. Questioned about their poor grades the students indicated a variety of factors - other than not knowing enough German. Some had the volume set too low and did not turn it up til they had missed a few questions. Some had headsets with static interferences. Others admitted to human shortcomings: not functioning well at 9am and still others indicated that they did not perform well under that type of pressure and that they would have done better if they had had more time to reflect on their answers. Repeatedly, the biggest objection was to the accent of the speaker on the tape. I am therefore suggesting that it is ignorance of the students' needs as well as the impersonal and artificial setting of the exam that contribute to our students' less than stellar performance." Data collected by me under a Sloan grant indicates that the students also do poorly for the following reasons: a) the exam is administered at a time when the students have not been exposed to the language for at least three months. That assumes that the students took the language in senior year, which is not always the case. Sometimes a year has elapsed since they actively worked with the language. (Work done by Flaugher and Spencer confirms that test scores decline as the number of years between language study and exam time increases)[12], b) equipment malfunction, ranging from broken tapes to malfunctioning booths,

c) lack of supervisory personnel that is familiar with the language being tested and with the exam. Lastly: in the absence of a modern central console and individual booths some College assemble the students in a large room and have the students do a Listening Comprehension exam from a cassette recorder placed on a table in front of the class. These factors do not conspire to bring out the best in the students. What all of these testing methods have in common is that they are all artificial: they predominantely test grammar and vocabulary and avoid testing for communicative ability. There are other, equally disturbing aspects of standards and quality control: some Colleges omit the Writing part of the exam on the premise that they don't bother administering it because experience has shown that the students fail it anyhow. Other Colleges omit the Speaking part because grading it should actually require a team (a minimum of two) testers and such personnel is lacking. In one College the Listening part of the tape had been garbled in a section, but instead of procuring a new tape the students were asked to "just skip" the questions pertaining to that question. This type of laxity and alteration only exacerbates an already tense situation.

Clearly, we use the placement exams because we have to use some measurable standard device to place our students. But we also use the exam because it is easy to administer to a large number of students and because it can be graded either by machine or with a grading sheet. I am not arguing for the development of departmentalized placement exams, but I am recommending that we augment the placement exam, in our case MLA Standardized Cooperative FL Test, Form MB, or tests of a similar profile, with a five or ten minute oral part to test

the students' communicative abilities.

Before concluding I would like to address the question of numbers - that is, how many students are being tested and how much personnel do we need. Or, what is the practical feasibility of including such a communicative competence section on the placement exam? When the number of students tested is only thirty or less two people can easily test the students in the manner described. But when testing 100 students or more even the most dedicated would be likely to raise objections unless the personnel increased accordingly. Those objections are indeed valid: already Dizney & Gromen, doing research on the predictive validity on cooperative FL tests admitted to not using the Speaking part because "the costs and time involved were prohibitive."[13] I would briefly like to remind us of the objective of this method of testing: to prevent that students who have had two or more years of a Foreign Language are backplaced into elementary classes. Given this objective and given the fact that many Colleges do test more than 100 students (25% of which can be expected to backplace) I recommend that those students who are put into a beginners class be tested on an individualized basis, which would obviate the need for testing all students orally. Ideally the department should get a list of students to be backplaced so that one would know before classes begin who would be backplaced. Some departments do their grading in house, themselves, and know at the end of the day who is to be backplaced. However, if at all possible,

we should attempt to test students in a more personal and low-stress environment and help them produce better work. This is also important as it helps us locate those students who would have placed in a third semester class but should really be in a more advanced class. (This,perhaps, is less critical. As it happens, I usually transfer two or three students out of the third semester into an advanced Conversation/Composition or Literature class.) If this sounds still unattainable or too idealistic I suggest the following procedure which is presently being implemented at Loyola College: knowing of the inadequacy of the placement procedures the department has decided to lower the cut-off point, which would allow more students into the third semester class. Another method,used by a number of Colleges, is to automatically place students one level higher than their scores would indicate - a procedure which still leaves the advanced students in the elementary classes, only instead of finding themselves in First Semester German they are now in Second Semester German that is, they are still backplaced. The success with the pilot study of thirty students indicates that an exam that includes a test for oral competency and communicative ability is more finely tuned to the students' as well as the departments' needs. In a time of stagnating enrollment and increasing diminuation of the liberal arts by the more career-minded programs we can no longer afford to let 25% of our students waste away in courses in which they do not belong. The need for another type of testing has been identified repeatedly and it is up to the professors and teachers not to wait for testing institutions to hand them another exam, but to modify existing ones to meet their as well as the students' needs.

Notes:

1

Lawrence M. Aleamoni and Richard E. Spencer, "Development of the University of Illinois Foreign Language Placement and Proficiency System and Its Results for Fall, 1966 and 1967," Modern Language Journal, vol. LII, no. 6 (Oct. 1968), pp. 355-359.
Also: A report by Dizney/Gromen addressed itself to the "substantial degree of overlap in score distributions" on the placement tests and invited "caution in applying set test criteria for individuals in course placement." Henry F. Dizney and Lauren Gromen, "Predictive Validity and Differential Achievement on Three MLA-Cooperative Foreign Language Tests," Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1967, 27, p. 1130.

2

An enlightening and helpful discussion of the problems of testing for oral proficiency as well as of including oral interviews in certain placement tests can be found in Claus Reschke's "Oral Proficiency Testing in Special Circumstances: A Viable Alternative," presented at the Annual Meeting of the ACTFL (San Francisco, Ca., Nov. 24-26, 1983), ERIC document ED 240 861. FL 014 237.

3

Esther M. Eaton, "Evaluation and Testiug in Teaching Modern Foreign Languages," School Life, vol. 44 (March 1962), p. 21.

4

About the congruence of teaching material and testing procedures Robert A. Fischer comments: "The classroom testing program, if it is to be an effective and valid instrument of evaluation, must be congruent with the goals and activities of the instructional sequence." R. A. Fischer, "Towards a Practical Model of Communicative Competence Testing Program," Proceedings of the International Language Testing Symposium of the Interuniversitäre Sprachtestgruppe (4th, Essex, England, Sept. 14-17, 1981). ERIC document # ED 217 724, FL 013 014, p. 37.

5

Paul Pimsleur, "New Approaches to Old Problems Through Testing," ERIC Document # ED 044 065, p. 1. Also: Canadian Modern Language Review, vol. 27, no. 1 (Oct. 1970), pp 23-32.

6

We are presently embarking on a more formalized, longitudinal study to elicit what students do well on what sections and after how many years of German. This is part of a bigger research project funded by the Sloan Foundation to study the impact of technology on FL teaching. A precise formulation of the study will be forthcoming when all the data is collected and evaluated. In the meantime the pilot experiment confirmed that Placement exams can be improved with the addition of a communicative ability test.

7

Constance Curtin, Allen Avner, and Lu Ann Smith, "The Pimsleur Battery as a Predictor of Student Performance," Modern Language Journal, vol. 67, no. 1 (1983), p. 33.

8

John B. Carroll, The Teaching of French as a Foreign Language in Eight Countries (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1975), pp. 47-111.

9

This format is similar to the method used by the Goethe House when testing for Zertifikat Deutsch.

10

Pimsleur. About misplaced students: "Our placement procedures must of course assign the mass of students to the classes they belong in, but they should also recognize when an individual student needs special guidance and bring his case to our attention." See note #5, page 6.

11

The influence of friendliness and test atmosphere on performance is also recognized by Martha Herzog and Victor Shaw of the DLIFLC in their report "An Indirect Test of Oral Proficiency," ERIC Document #ED 238 299 (A paper presented at the MLA, December 27-30, 1983, in New York), p. 3.

12

Ronald L. Flaugher and Richard E. Spencer, "College Foreign Language Placement and the Intervening Years Problem," Modern Language Journal, vol. LI, no. 7 (Nov.,1967), pp. 394-398.

13

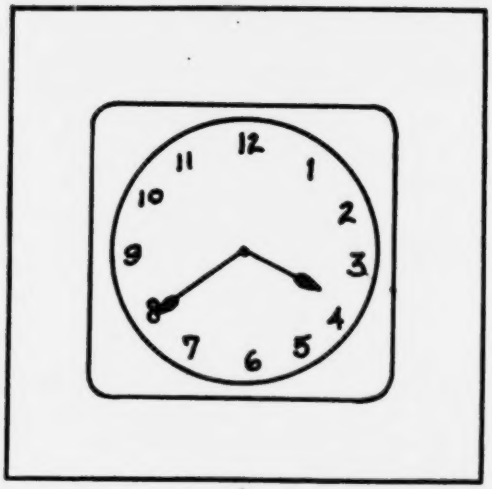
Henry F. Dizney and Lauren Gromen, "Predictive Validity and Differential Achievement on Three MLA-Cooperative Foreign Language Test," Educational and Psychological Measurement, 1967, 27, p. 1128.

SPEAKING | Approximate Time—10 minutes (I)

I had the students read this.

Check for pronunciation

—„Was willst du eigentlich später werden, Karl?"
—„Wenn ich mit dem Studium fertig bin, will ich Englischlehrer werden."
—„Wieviel verdient man denn dann?"
—„Man muß jahrelang unterrichten, bis man 2500 oder 2750 Schillinge im Monat verdient."
—„Willst du denn nur Englisch unterrichten?"
—„Ja. Und wenn ich es perfekt kann, geh' ich nach Amerika und lehre dort an einer amerikanischen Schule. Das ist vielleicht der einfachste Weg zum Reichtum."
—„Dann wünsche ich dir viel Erfolg mit deinen Studien und mit deinen Ambitionen."



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2

(II) Describe the pictures

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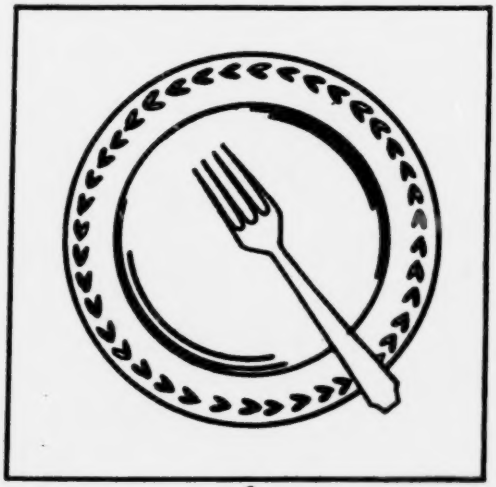

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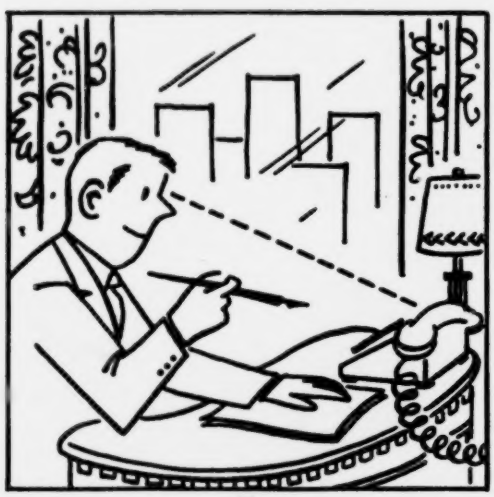

3

4

End of Speaking test.